A cognitive approach to the lexical semantics of Chinese shame words

Bai Lin   Liu Hongyong   Ng Bee Chin

Division of Linguistics and Multilingual Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore

LBAI1@e.ntu.edu.sg; MBCNG@ntu.edu.sg; LIUHONGYONG@ntu.edu.sg

Abstract: This paper explores the lexical semantic properties of five Chinese words expressing the emotion of SHAME. An in-depth examination of the dimensions (such as cause, effect, social class, social norm, and experience), whereby emotions are evaluated, reveals that what plays a crucial role in the conceptualization of shame in Mandarin Chinese is the self-other feature, which is implicit in the denotative meaning of these words.

Keywords: lexical semantics; self-other feature; Chinese shame words

1   Introduction

Language is one of the most important modalities for human beings to express emotion, those internal states that deny simplistic definition. The complexity of emotion is also reflected in the semantic ambiguity of emotion words, especially since a set of near-synonyms can express more or less the same emotion. We cannot pinpoint the semantic differences between the set of shame words, for instance, unless we have a clear picture of what shame is. In other words, we need to know the specific features associated with the "shame" emotion before we embark on the journey of searching for the precise lexical semantic differences between the set of shame words.

There are many approaches to the study of emotion. One effective way follows Scherer's (1984) component process model (CPM), according to which emotion is viewed as interrelated and synchronized changes in cognitive and behavioral subsystems —subjective feeling, bodily symptoms, expressions, action tendencies, regulation, evaluation and other general features of the emotional state. We can thus study emotions by looking at the values of the parameters in each subsystem via experimental studies.

Putting all the subsystems mentioned above into consideration, Fontaine et al. (2007) made a proposal that there are four general dimensions of emotions, namely pleasantness, arousal, control, and unpredictability. Moreover, they further pointed out that to identify emotion as shame, guilt, embarrassment, and self-anger, more specific dimensions are needed. In terms of Chinese shame, Li et al. (2004) argues that Chinese shame words can be divided into two groups based on a stance of observation: one group focuses on one's

own judgment (self), and the other focuses on others' judgment (other). The current study aims to further elaborate the self-other features in more detail, and test it as a dimension to evaluate a set of Chinese shame words: *dīuliǎn*, *xīuchǐ*, *chǐrǔ*, *nánwéiqíng*, and *gāngà*. There is no direct English equivalent to these expressions – suffice it to say that they describe particular facets of "shame" which we will elaborate below.

The structure of the paper is as follows. In section 2, we will introduce the questionnaire survey, the participants, and the implementation of the study. In section 3, we will present results of our statistic analysis of the questionnaire data. Section 4 ends the paper with the conclusion that in the Chinese cultural context the dimension of self-other orientation and social class factor are significantly prominent in tapping the nature of Chinese shame concepts.

2   The Study

To implement this study, we adopt a psycho-linguistic self-report method with the ELIN questionnaire instrument established by the Swiss Center of Affective Sciences. Twenty- three items of the questionnaire were selected to address the following questions: When you hear/read this word in your language, how likely is it, as inferred from the meaning of the word, that the emotional experience referred to by the word is (1) attributed to self or others; (2) affect the person only or affect others; (3) is related with social class; (4) is judged or socially accepted norms, or by the persons' own standards, ideals or values; (5)happens when other people are present or not.

Thirty-two (17 female, 15 male) Chinese native speakers participated in the study, whose ages range from 20 to 37 (Mean=25, SD=3.827). The participants were asked to indicate how likely it is for somebody to infer those features when the words are used to describe emotional states of a person. A 9-point Likert scale is used to mark extremely unlikely (1) to extremely likely (9).

3   Results

In this section, we will further elaborate the self-other feature and use it as a dimension to appraise various components of the emotional episodes.

3.1   Cause (self *vs.* others)

Shame and guilt are frequent emotions, because they serve great interpersonal, social and moral functions (Barrett, 1995). Cultures like Chinese that value honor tend to share and acknowledge both individual fame as well as the reputation of a group, such as a family, a community, or a country as a whole. Whoever breaches the accepted social norms will fall into shame and bring humiliation to the community he belongs to.

A similar trend is shown among the five Chinese shame words in the cause of the emotional experience. As Figure 1 points out, it is highly likely for the shame experience to be caused by one's own behavior, followed by a close person's behavior, and then

strangers' behaviour. If the stimulus event is caused by oneself, or a close person, it is least likely to be caused by the intrinsic quality, while this is not the case if it is caused by strangers. Strangers' material possesions are least likely to cause one shame. This implies that acts of oneself or a close person are likely to cause people to feel shame, but people tend not to judge them as negatively as the bad intrinsic qualities of themselves or the close person. Interestingly, people feel shame even for strangers' behaviors.
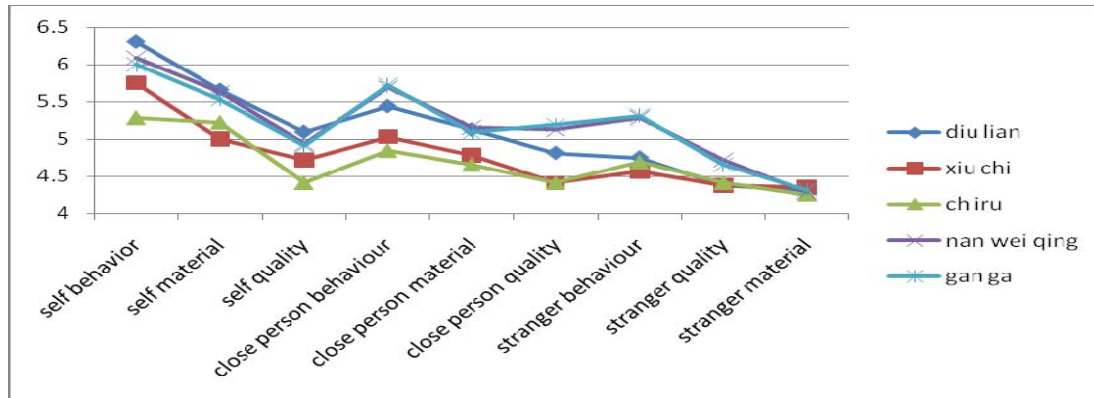

Figure 1. Cause of the shame experience

Lewis (2000) proposed that guilt is an emotion that identifies a self-produced specific behavior as bad (what one does), whereas shame is an emotion that sees the entire self as bad or worthless (what one is) (c.f. Niedenthal et al. 1994; Frank et al. 2000). It needs to be noted that in the Chinese context, results of the current study suggest that the event that lead to "shame" experience is more likely to be attributed to specific behaviors (what one does) rather than the intrinsic qualities of oneself or the close person (what one is). Therefore, distinctions as to whether the attribution is causality of behavior in guilt, or the causality to the self in shame (Sabini & Silver, 1998) is indeed hard to apply to Chinese shame and guilt. There are even occasions when individuals don't condemn themselves as a bad person when they feel or express their feeling in Chinese shame words. So our results seem to suggest that unlike western societies that have distinct shame and guilt emotional experiences and terms to decode them, Chinese is a culture in which embarrassment, shame and guilt can be used interchangeably.

3.2   Social class factor

Emotions serve social functions, and embarrassment shown by lower status group members to higher status groups conveys submissiveness and serves as a measure of appeasement (Keltner et al. 1998). This is more commonly seen in collective societies where hierarchy, status and social power distance are recognized and followed by individuals to enable them to fit in suitable social positions (Niedenthal et al., 2006). Our data also shows a trend in that all the emotional experiences denoted by the five shame words are less likely to be caused by people from a lower social class, and are more likely to be caused by someone who is from a higher social class.
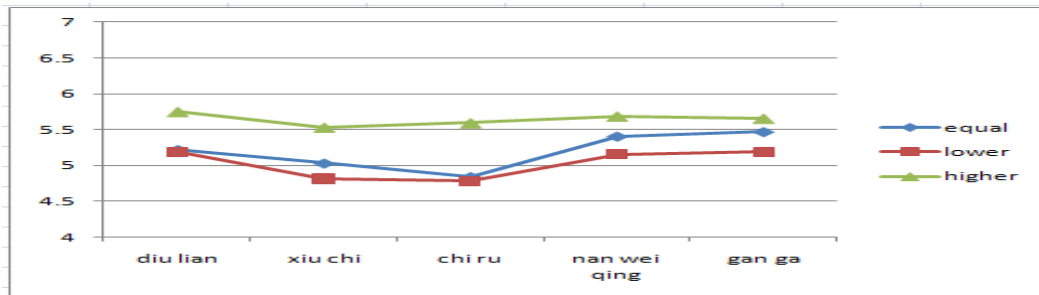
Figure 2. Social status of the people who cause the shame experience

3.3 Social norms vs. self values

According to Niedenthal (2006: 80), emotions such as guilt, shame, embarrassment, pride and hubris are all based on one's self-evaluation in regard to personal standards and goals, and moral values, as taught by our social environment. Guilt and shame are deemed as punishing emotions and may involve self-awareness or self punishing when something goes wrong. As is shown in Figure 3, the events that lead to the emotional experience are more likely to be incongruent with the person's own standards, ideals, or values, than to be judged according to laws or socially accepted norms. The mean scaling for experiences coded by "*xiūchǐ*" (M_{self}=6.47; M_{social}=5.68) and "*chǐrǔ*" (M_{self}=6.53; M_{social}=5.80)*,* in particular, are higher in both being against self-norm and social norm. Experiences exemplified by "*nánwéiqíng*" (M_{self}=5.29; M_{social}=4.57) and "*gāngà*" (M_{self}=5.25; M_{social}=4.34) are the lower in being against self-norm and social norm. We predict that the likelihood of being against norms may be a factor for the possible consequences caused by emotional experiences.
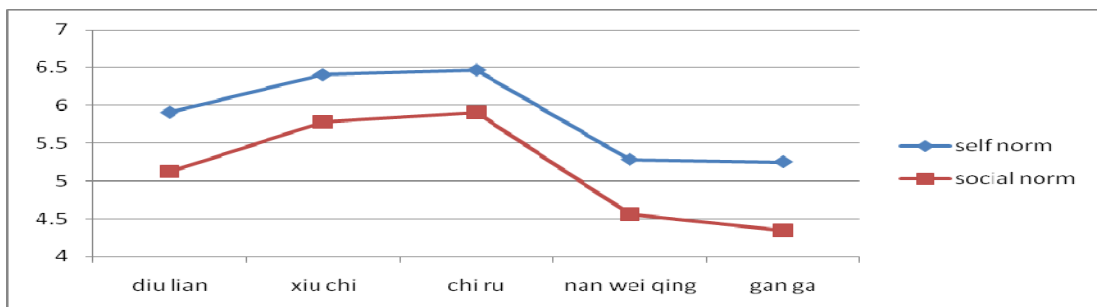

Figure 3. Emotional experiences incongruent with social norms or self norms

It is hard for an individual member of the society to distinguish between whether he is judging an event according to his own values or according to the social norms, since individuals are continuously being socialized and keep adjusting their beliefs and behaviors according to widely accepted social norms and standards. Scherer's (1984, 2001, 2009) appraisal theory helps to explain such individual differences in reaction to the same event. This theory suggests that the same events may be evaluated and interpreted differently as compared to one's personal self-ideal or internalized moral code.
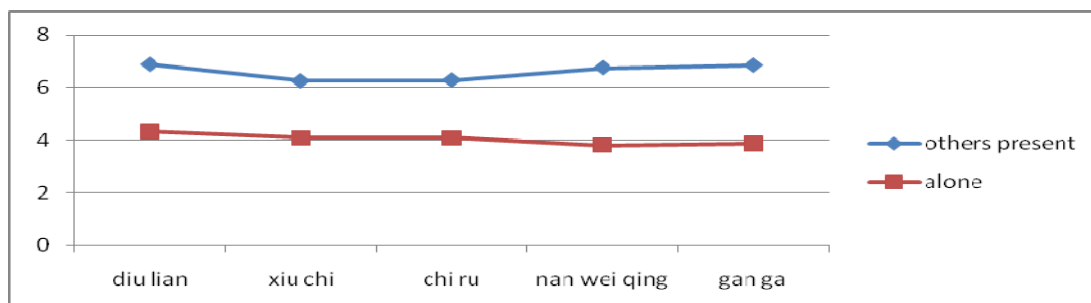
3.4 Presence of others or not

Figure 4. Emotional experiences with others' precence or not

The survey results demonstrate that incitement of "shame experiences" (exemplified by our shame words) is generally higher when others are present than when in solitude. In particular, "*dīuliǎn", "nánwéiqíng"*, and "*gāngà"* show slightly higher mean scaling (6.875, 6.75, and 6.844), suggesting that these shame words prerequisite the presence of others. Edelmann (1981) claimed that public emotions such as embarrassment may seldom be experienced in private. Others' judgment or public audience of one's act may make one reflect one's negative acts and feel shame. Li et al. (2004) have also grouped this kind of shame in a separate main group from the judgment of others. Similarly, Bedford (1975) and Frank (2000) have revealed that public exposure of the shortfall may result in shame.

3.5 Affect (self *vs*. others)

3.5.1 Affect the person only or affect others

A greater tendency for shame experience to be caused by someone else or belief that one's act may affect others is normally seen in cultures that respect group harmony and authority, because deviation from accepted norms is against group goals. Niedenthal (2006: 326) has also pointed out that individuals from collectivist cultures tend to appraise a situation in terms of the implication for the whole group, as well as the instrumental or destructive effect on their social status, or the consequences for the group
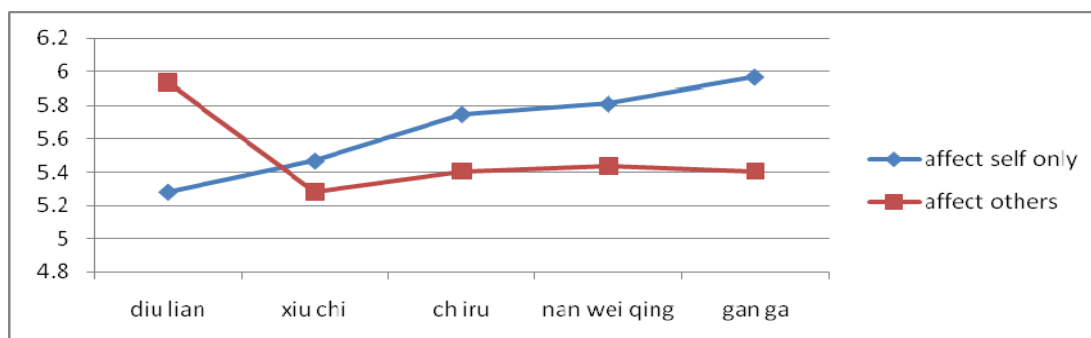

Figure 5. Emotional experiences affect others or the person only

Results demonstrate that "*dīuliǎn*" shows a distinct feature in question of "the likelihood that the event leading to the emotional experience affected others/ or affected the person only". With mean scaling (affect others) at 5.94, and (affect self) at 5.28, experiences denoted by "*dīuliǎn*" are more likely to affect others. In contrast, the experiences of "*gāngà*" (mean scaling 5.97) and "*nánwéiqíng*" (mean scaling 5.81) tend to be more likely to affect self only. As is shown in sentence (1) and (2), the event that leads to the experience of "*dīuliǎn*" is more likely to affect the group, or close persons, than affect the person only. Sentence (3) shows that it might be a stranger who causes the speaker to feel "*dīuliǎn*'. Equivalently, a person's behavior (or intrinsic quality, or material possession) may affect others. The results also support our discussion on the cause of shame in that the acts of close persons or strangers can bring one shame in the same way that one's own act may affect one's close persons, or others.
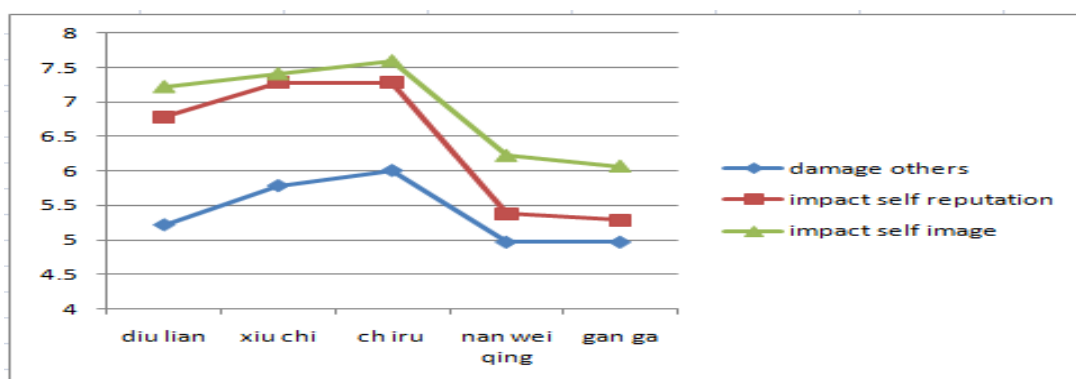
3.3.2 Damage (others *vs.* self)

Figure 6. Impact of emotional experience

Figure 6 demonstrates respondents' scale of likelihood for the questions "the event that led to the emotional experience involved (serious) damage to others"; "the event that led to the emotional experience had an impact on the person's own reputation (that is, on how other people regard her or him)" and "the event that led to the emotional experience had impact on the person's own self-image (that is, on how the person sees her-/himself)". As has been predicted by Figure 3, where "*xīuchǐ*" and "*chǐrǔ*" show higher possibilities of being against both social norms and self norms, the two also show higher possibility of involving serious damage to others, and impacting the person's own reputation and the person's own self-image. The events that lead to the experiences of "*nánwéiqíng*" and "*gāngà*" show lower likelihood of both damaging others and impacting self reputation and self image. We conclude that compared to other shame experiences like "*dīuliǎn*", "*xīuchǐ*" and "*chǐrǔ*", emotional experiences inferred by "*nánwéiqíng*" and "*gāngà*", arise in situations where more trivial transgressions and failures have occurred and less serious consequences are involved. The result supports our prediction in 3.3 that the higher the likelihood for "*chǐrǔ*" and "*xīuchǐ*" to be against social and self norm is a factor for the seriousness of the consequences caused.

4. Conclusion

With subjects' response to the 23 questions as variables, five emotion words were analyzed using the average linkage method of the Hierarchical Cluster Analysis in SPSS 18.0. Hierarchical clusters were computed by the dissimilarities between cases as indicated by the distances shown in Figure 7, where "*gāngà*" amd "*nánwéiqíng*" are more similar in self-other dimension. Next we checked to see how the two clusters (cluster 1 "*dīuliǎn*", "*xīuchǐ*" "*chǐrǔ*" vs. cluster 2- "*nánwéiqíng* ", "*gāngà*") in the two cluster solution differ from one another on the variables that were used to cluster them. Independent samples T-test of these two groups shows that cluster 1 has lower mean cause by others, affect only oneself, damage others, impact on self-image or impact on self-reputation. In other words, the emotional experiences denoted by "*gāngà*" and "*nánwéiqíng*" tend to be caused by oneself, affect only oneself, and are less likely to involve severe damage to others or self image and reputation. However, the experiences denoted by "*dīuliǎn*" are more likely to be caused by others, to affect others and are more likely to involve damage to others or self image or self reputation.
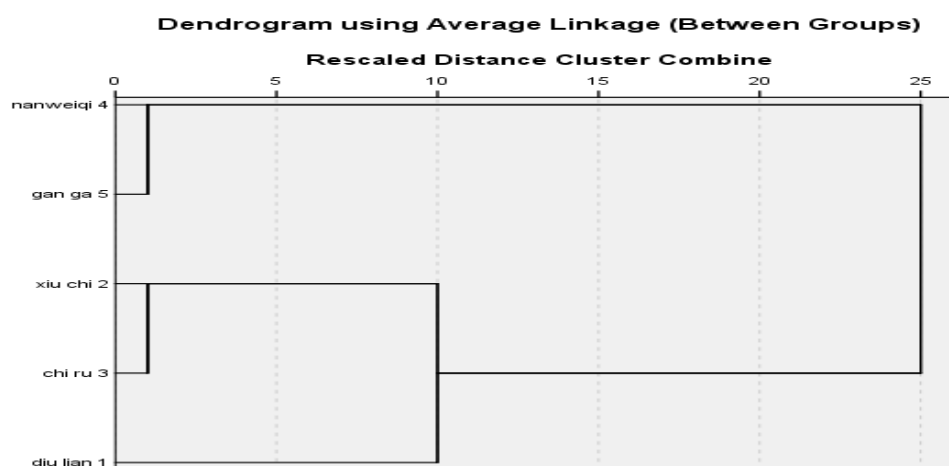

Figure 7. Cluster Analysis on self-other dimension

The findings of this study are significant in that our data and analysis show that in the Chinese cultural context the dimensions of self-other orientation and social class factor are obviously prominent. Future studies could be done to test whether such features are absent in other cultural contexts. Our study offers a cognitive perspective to the study of the lexical semantics of Chinese shame words. This approach can be extended to the study of all the other emotion words in Mandarin Chinese, and makes it possible for cross-linguistic study on emotion words. Although the questionnaire of the current study encompasses all the subsystems of emotions as proposed by componential approach, the twenty-three questions in the current study are mainly from the evaluation category. Studies on the other features that are associated with shame emotions are also needed.

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